

# HOPE IS THE THING WITH FEATHERS

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**<https://wandering.shop/@karawynn>. Her new tale reminds us that . . .**

## HOPE IS THE THING WITH FEATHERS

"Kuro?" I say softly. The back of the SUV is open, but all the carriers are still covered, and I can't tell which is which.

"Hello," Kuro croaks. Middle row, left side.

I resist the urge to turn and see if anyone is watching me. With my body blocking as best I can, I lean forward, lift the cloth slightly, and push the paperclip through the wire mesh. After a long couple of seconds, I feel him take it from my fingers.

Then I walk away. I've done everything I can; the rest is up to the Crebain.

The mood among the rest of the team is excited and optimistic. I know if my plan works, today's experiment will fail spectacularly, which means the lab will lose all of its DARPA funding. I suppress a twinge of guilt and remind myself why I'm doing this.

"Message for Nicodemus from Jenner," I say aloud, and then wince and flap my hands a little in anxiety. I glance around, fearing I've given myself away. If anyone

realizes what's happening, I'll lose my job for sure. I might even be sent to jail—interfering with a U.S. government project has got to be breaking some kind of law.

But as usual, no one is paying any attention to me. Dr. Verdin is talking to someone on her phone; Emily and the two grad students are standing in a group, chatting to each other. I stay back out of the way, rocking slightly from foot to foot, and wait.

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I am what is called an “unreliable speaker.” Most of the time when I open my mouth, something completely unexpected emerges. I hate it when people ask me questions—there's so much expectation hanging on what I say next, even though I often can't control it. Plus the more anxious I am, the less likely I am to be able to speak at all.

Sometimes there's a reason behind what I say that only makes sense to me. Like the other day, one of the grad students asked me if I wanted a tangerine. I meant to say, “No, thank you,” but instead my brain flashed on the last time I ate a tangerine, and the movie I was watching at the time, and my mouth quoted, “I love this plan! I'm excited to be a part of it!”

So then I had a tangerine I didn't want.

Sometimes I'll blurt out a word or phrase that embodies the way I am feeling, like I might repeat the word “Galapagos” when I have a lot of extra nervous energy I don't know what to do with. Galapagos Galapagos Galapagos. I love the way it sounds, like a trotting horse.

Other times, I have no idea what the hell my mouth is even doing. It just runs off without me.

The unpredictability of this, and the way people react when I say something they don't expect, means I converse as little as possible. I have a tablet I can type on, with AAC software that speaks out loud for me, but I can't really carry it around while I'm working. The other lab personnel have gotten used to ignoring me most of the time.

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Emily and Ji-Won start walking toward the SUV, arguing about the best way to unload the carriers. They're concerned about stressing out the birds with unnecessary movement. I figure they won't want me around for this part, so I move farther away, out onto the field. I sit down and run a hand across the grass, letting the shorn blades tickle the palm of my hand.

\* \* \*

My body doesn't always do what I mean for it to do, either. I'm clumsy and awkward. My handwriting looks like a kindergartener's no matter which hand I use. I can't drive a car or ride a bike, and the only way I can catch a ball is with my face. I constantly bump into doorways and corners of furniture because I don't have a good sense of where my body's edges are.

I'm super lucky to have the job I do, because not many people want an employee who's as accident-prone as I am. Most employers look at developmentally disabled people and think we're more trouble than we're worth, and they don't give us a real chance. Dr. Verdin is autistic herself, though, so she kind of understands, even though she's not dyspraxic like me. She doesn't get mad at me when I mess up.

Well, once she yelled at me when I bumped into a table and knocked a splidar scanner off, but she apologized later. She was just frustrated, which I understand. I get frustrated, too. A lot.

I should explain that I work at the university's Bird Lab. I'm not a researcher or even a lab tech, just a part-time caretaker—basically a glorified janitor. But Dr. Verdin knows how much I love it there, so she lets me hang around and watch even when I'm not working, so long as I stay out of everyone's way.

At first I spent all my free time with the parrots. Parrots have been my main

spin—my special interest—since I was a teenager; my exhaustive knowledge of all things psittacine is what convinced Dr. Mukherjee, who shares the lab with Dr. Verdin, that I should have this job. I really wanted a parrot of my own, or even just a parakeet, but the group home where I live doesn't allow any pets. Hanging out with Dr. Mukherjee's parrots was the next best thing.

Their cages are all in one big room together: three African Greys, two common parakeets (who share a cage), and a Bare-Eyed Cockatoo. The cockatoo isn't technically a parrot; they're *Psittaciformes*, but from a different family. The grad students just call them collectively "the Talking Birds," like they're on loan from Narnia.

In case you haven't figured it out already, the Bird Lab researchers are all total geeks who love fantasy and science fiction. So at least in that one way I fit in. Though I didn't have much access to anything besides picture books until I was almost fourteen, which is why I read a lot of kids' books now—not because I have a reading disability (I don't), but because I have a lot of catching up to do.

Anyway, though I liked to hang out in the Talking Bird room, a lot of my work time has been spent with Dr. Verdin's corvids. The lab has three different species of crow, spread across eighteen aviaries, each of which is at least twice as large as my whole room at home. Every day I have to pick up anything the birds have dropped, before hosing down all the concrete floors. I also refill the water dispensers, fill the food trays, and check the caching trays to make sure that nothing spoilable is stuck in there—nuts, kibble, or bits of oatcake I leave alone, but fruits, vegetables, and meat have to be fished out. Then once a week I scrub everything with vinegar to disinfect it. That's my least-favorite part, because the smell is so sharp and overwhelming.

Crows are incredibly messy. I don't hold it against them—I'm messy too. Eating neatly is hard. I don't like to use forks because no matter how careful I am, eventually I will stab myself in the lip with it. So I use spoons, or just pick things up with my fingers. I don't like to eat around other people, because they stare at me.

Anyway, cleaning up after the crows takes quite a lot of time, so after a few months I'd gotten to know them pretty well. They're smarter than most people realize, which is something I can relate to. Corvids *can* learn to speak human languages, but they rarely use more than a few words, whereas some African Greys can learn hundreds, and speak in whole phrases. Because they don't talk, everyone—even the researchers, often—assumes crows aren't as intelligent as parrots. But that's not true.

I couldn't speak at all until I was ten years old, and even when I did start talking, it wasn't in a "normal" way. Everybody—doctors, teachers, even my own parents—assumed I was intellectually disabled. They either talked down to me like I was a pet, or around me like I didn't exist.

I understood everything, though. I mean, I have an auditory processing disorder, so I can't parse a long series of instructions, or sort out sounds in a noisy environment—but I was listening the whole time.

Even when people were discussing how stupid I was.

\* \* \*

At last everyone seems to be ready. Alex mans the video camera from behind a nearby tripod. A light breeze lifts my short hair as Dr. Verdin and I walk down the row of cages from opposite ends, picking up the cloth covers; Emily and Ji-Won follow behind, unlatching and opening the doors.

Onyx is the first one out, with Kuro almost as quick at the other end. The others exit more slowly, taking in the unfamiliar surroundings, and three of them—Cole, Sable, and Nyeusi—don't leave the cages at all. Jet flies to the middle of the nearest large tree, a big old oak that stands at the south edge of the field. Kuro and two more follow. I recognize the "gather" call coming from the tree, though I can't make out who it's coming from. (Not Kuro, presumably, because his beak is full of paperclip.)

The stragglers take flight in ones and twos, until the whole flock is perched in the oak together.

Meanwhile, the humans regroup at the table they've set up with the monitoring and control equipment. One of the laptop screens displays a map with nine colored dots, each labeled with a number, clustered near the center. Emily reorients the map so the cluster is in the lower right, and the campus sprawls out to the north and west. She clicks a premarked spot just outside of Harris Hall to set the destination, then sends the coordinates to the Crebain's leg bands.

In the tree, each Crebain will be feeling a sharp electric shock—the cue to move—followed by a lower-level shock that will decrease as they move toward the destination, or increase if they move away from it. There's left-right directionality built in also; different intensities on each leg band indicate which way to turn, kind of like reins on a horse. If reins were electrical, that is.

I've felt this shock—held my finger inside one of the leg bands as the command was sent. The first shock, even though it's short, really *hurts*, and the ongoing current is pretty unpleasant, too. I don't like that they use it on the Crebain.

They used to use shocks like that on people like me—autistic people, especially ones with intellectual disabilities or whose dyspraxia made it hard for them to speak out loud. If I had been born just a few years earlier, that might have happened to me—it was still legal in the twenties, when I was a baby.

I get agitated just thinking about it, and when Ji-Won turns around in her chair to look at me I realize that I've started to make little moaning sounds in my throat. I pet my arms to try and calm myself down, and force myself to think about something nicer, so they won't make me leave.

\* \* \*

Most biologists are squirrely about asserting that any animal other than humans possesses true language. Even with primates and cetaceans, they talk about “communication” and “signaling” instead.

But corvids' native “signaling” is pretty damned complicated. There was a particular sound the crows always made when I showed up—and they used it regardless of whether I was there to feed them or clean the cage, and they didn't make that exact sound for anyone else. So I figured that was their name for me.

People have known for a long time that crows can recognize individual humans from facial features; studies decades ago proved they communicate to other crows about which people are “good” and which are “bad,” from a crow perspective. So the idea that they have names for individual humans makes sense, even though I've never seen a scientific paper that acknowledges it.

But what really blew my mind is the day I realized two of them were discussing me *when I wasn't even in the room* with them. I was next door, quietly watching the camera feed with Dr. Verdin as Emily conducted some facial recognition experiments in one of the testing rooms. She was running the same procedure with several different crows in succession, with Alex bringing the next bird in and taking the last one out.

During the first swap, the one who was leaving said my name, along with something else I didn't understand . . . and the other one, the one Alex had just brought in, said my name back. Then the second one flew up to the perch nearest the camera, cocked its head to look right in the lens, first with one eye and then the other, and said my name again.

I was dead certain the first crow—who had watched me walk into the monitoring room—had just told the second one that I was back there, watching them through the camera. Unfortunately this made me so excited that my mouth started running all on its own, and Dr. Verdin asked me to leave because I was too distracting.

After that I really started paying attention. Learning the crow names for the other

lab personnel was easy, and the more I listened and watched, the more I began to pick up on. It wasn't all vocal—some of it was positional, like holding wings at a particular angle, or opening their beaks, or even just fluffing neck feathers. Eventually I figured out that caws that sound the same but have different durations are actually separate (but usually related) concepts. For example, the sound that means “flying” or “flight” is the same as the sound for “wings,” just held a tiny bit longer.

It wasn't exactly like full sentences or anything, but I could get the gist of what they were talking about if it wasn't too abstract. The crows knew that I understood them, at least to some extent, because they started asking me for specific foods.

I complied whenever I could, even to the point of sneaking a bag of Cheetos in once. Dr. Verdin would have been mad if she'd caught me, because Cheetos are one of the foods that they only offer as rewards in training, but she never found out.

I'll be honest—using food to condition certain behaviors kind of bothers me, especially when the animals are really intelligent, as crows clearly are. I had an ABA trainer for a long time when I was a kid, when everyone still thought I was intellectually disabled. The only time I was ever allowed to have my favorite foods or drinks, like Goldfish crackers or fruit juice, was when I did what the trainer wanted.

This was before I had any kind of AAC device, so I had no way to say that what they wanted was boring, or uncomfortable, or even painful—and I'm honestly not sure it would have made any difference. I learned that how I felt and what I wanted didn't matter; only obedience did.

This is the kind of thing I work on in therapy with Dr. Amy now—feeling like my feelings matter, and standing up for myself.

Anyway, it's not like my parents intended to starve me, but there were few enough things that I could stand to eat, especially when I was little, that I ended up really underweight. My mother never understood my sensitivity to taste and texture; she had this idea that if she just kept making me eat things I hated, I would eventually like them, or at least get used to them. But that's not how sensory processing disorder works—it doesn't get “better” with practice. Two years of smelling vinegar hasn't made it any less awful.

I know it's not exactly the same situation—I've never seen a crow with food sensitivities, and in fact most of them will eat practically anything. But they do have favorites, and I couldn't stop feeling like the whole system was kind of mean. So I snuck them treats when I could.

Communication between me and the corvids was largely one-way for a long time. I didn't want to train them to do anything, and listening without replying is kind of my default, so I didn't really think of trying to talk back to them until after we got the Crebain.

They arrived as eggs in an incubator, twelve of them, and hatched in early May. No one called them “Crebain” right away—at first they were just “Emily's crows,” because it was her project. (I mean, Dr. Verdin is the PI, but she's only advising. Emily is the lead postdoc and the one really running the show.) Then one day Alex made a joking reference to Saruman's corvid spies in *Lord of the Rings*, and it was so obviously apt that the name stuck.

Baby crows are shockingly ugly. They are blind, naked, awkward greyish-pink things, with skinny necks and huge heads. Imagine E.T., if you've ever seen that movie, but with a gaping pink beak. They need to be hand-fed every fifteen minutes or so, dawn to dusk, for the first ten weeks of their life. And by fed, I mean you have to stuff food directly down their gullet.

So it was all hands on deck at the Bird Lab. Dr. Verdin paid me for the extra hours, which was good because it was tedious work. At least the incubator room was warm, though—the rest of the lab is air-conditioned even in winter and I'm cold almost all

the time.

The hatchlings were the opposite of interesting—they just lay there until one of us “parent figures” got close, at which point they stretched their skinny necks upward and opened their giant pink mouths. I'd tweeze a bit of food down their throats, and as soon as I moved my hand away they'd go rock-still again.

Operating a pair of tweezers is not easy for someone with dyspraxia. I dropped way more food than I held onto. Sometimes I would get so frustrated that I would melt down, which for me usually means sobbing and yelling and hitting my forehead with the heels of my hands. But I refused to give up, and it did get easier with practice. My body *can* learn repetitive movements; it just takes a really long time. By the time we started teaching them to self-feed, I was almost as good at tweezing as anyone else in the lab.

Everyone wanted the hatchlings to imprint on Emily, but she could hardly be there sixteen straight hours a day. Since I had more time on my hands, I ended up doing more feeding than anyone else. It wasn't that surprising that the Crebain bonded to me.

What did surprise me is that *I* bonded to *them*. I don't know when it happened, exactly. When Ebony died just a few days in, I only felt a sort of detached disappointment, but when Noir died in week five I was devastated. We'd been worried about her from the start—she was the smallest and she never seemed to catch up, even though we made a point of feeding her more than the others, and making sure her siblings didn't accidentally suffocate her.

I do wonder if maybe it's the act of taking care of someone that makes you love them, more than any particular quality of the person or creature that you love. That would explain a lot about newborn human babies, I think.

The remaining ten were all healthy and strong, and they fledged throughout July and into August, looking more like birds and less like awkward gargoyles. I guess we got complacent, because everyone in the lab was shocked when Dubh died overnight. I wasn't the only one crying, then. They sent his body off for an autopsy, but no one could figure out what went wrong. The Crebain are engineered hybrids, so maybe they messed up his genes somehow. I don't know.

So then there were nine. After that I didn't want to leave them alone overnight. I had a meltdown over it the first night, in front of everyone. Dr. Verdin didn't know what to do—I was sobbing, but when she got close to me I lashed out and hit her. I didn't mean to; it was like my body was acting all on its own.

She called Brown House and eventually Scott showed up and helped me calm down and drove me home. I was really embarrassed afterward, and terrified that Dr. Verdin would fire me, but Scott said he'd explain it to her. I guess he did, because I'm still here.

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The colored dots are all moving, in fits and starts, toward the center of the map. Each dot is labeled with a number; I watch number eight, which is Kuro. He's near the front of the cluster.

The second laptop has access to the campus security network, and Ji-Won switches around between camera feeds, trying to find one with a good view of the flock. But the Crebain understand cameras very well—they've lived with them their whole lives.

And unlike at the lab, the campus security network is set up to watch people, not birds. Since people don't tend to hang out on light poles or in trees, it's not even that hard for the Crebain to stay out of sight. Ji-Won is frustrated; Emily shakes her head and shrugs.

I check in with my face to make sure I'm not smiling.

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It's not entirely accurate to say I thought of trying to communicate with the Crebain, because honestly, it was as much Kuro's idea as mine. There was one day—it must have been sometime in August, because the Crebain weren't flying very well yet, but they had all their feathers. Anyway, Alex had asked me to help him set up an experiment, and I had my tablet out so I could ask questions and get some clarity on exactly what he wanted me to do. When we finished talking and I went to put my tablet away, I noticed Kuro, alone at the front of the aviary, watching me through the mesh. He said my name—my corvid name—and I stopped, because that was the first time I'd heard a Crebain use it. They must be communicating quite a bit with the other corvids, I realized, even though the Crebain were in the farthest aviary with a solid barrier between them and the rest. I wondered if Emily and the others knew that.

On impulse, because I had my tablet right there, I programmed it to say, "Hello, Kuro." It took a couple of minutes, because "Kuro" was a new word and I had to tell the program how to pronounce it. I thought he'd probably get bored and move on, but he didn't—he stayed right there and just watched me.

I have some pretty advanced AAC software now that allows for a lot of customization—so much better than the first device my parents got me when I was twelve. Then I could only say the couple of hundred words that came on the pre-programmed icon buttons. It was better than not being able to communicate at all, but I had a lot of thoughts that I could never express, because the words didn't exist in the software.

Since then I've spent a lot of years practicing typing, until my body finally learned what it was supposed to do, more or less. I type okay now, if it's on my tablet or a keyboard; phones are way too small. Not fast—I mostly use just one finger, and I have to stare at it the whole time—but well enough to get by.

Anyway, when I said—or made the tablet say—"Hello, Kuro," he got visibly excited: fluffed out his feathers, spread his wings and flapped them a little, and gave a jaunty little wag of his tail. He said my name again (I don't even know how to explain in human words what my name sounds like), and then . . . I'm pretty sure what came next was his attempt at "hello," even though it was honestly pretty terrible.

I was worried that Alex would be waiting on me, so I had the tablet say, "See you later, Kuro," and went on my way, but I couldn't stop thinking about it, about how interested and eager he'd seemed. About the possibility of two-way communication.

I remembered reading about a project that recorded wild dolphin sounds, analyzed the language (sorry, "signals"—and yes, I'm rolling my eyes), and used the recorded sounds to talk back to the dolphins. I realized that I could do something almost exactly like that with my AAC software: not only can it pronounce custom words based on the International Phonetic Alphabet, it also lets you record phrases and assign buttons to them for later playback.

I decided I would spend some time that evening after everyone was gone and try that out, see what kind of response I got. It worked so much better than I'd ever imagined.

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On the screen, the first birds have arrived at the pinned destination, way on the north side of campus. When all nine are inside the marked radius, Ji-Won sends the "spy" command—another type of shock.

"Spy" is the team's shorthand for "monitor which humans are present." The Crebain have been trained to identify people they've observed by selecting their photo from a lineup, just like the police use. So far, in the lab and in short-range tests, their success rate has been excellent, which has the team really excited.

Surveillance cameras are so ubiquitous now that I can't imagine the Crebain would be all that useful here in the United States; I figure the eventual idea is to

use them to spy on people in other countries, ones where the CIA doesn't have access to a camera network, and where there would be political repercussions if the surveillance were noticed.

I didn't know this until recently, but this is not the first time the government has tried to use corvids for spying. The CIA had a bunch of projects in the 1960s and 70s testing animal spies—they even tried to use cats, which went about as well as you'd expect. The raven project was about dropping bugs (surveillance devices, not insects) on Russian window ledges. Apparently it was going really well until their best spy raven was killed by a pair of wild ones. I wonder if that's why they sent us a dozen Crebain: safety in numbers.

Corvids are perfect for spy work, if you think about it. Even regular, non-engineered corvids have excellent facial recognition, visual perspective-taking (which basically means they know how to make sure others don't see them), and a solid sense of time, so they can plan ahead. Plus they're everywhere—there are native crows, ravens, and jays in nearly every country in the world. They can go anywhere outdoors, even over fences and walls, without attracting any attention at all. Drones are immediately suspicious, but a bird is just a bird.

The Crebain don't look exactly like our native American crows—they're maybe 10 percent larger, their beaks are less curved, and their eyes are set a little differently on their heads—but the differences are pretty subtle, and I doubt anyone other than an ornithologist would notice, even from less than a meter away. Most people just don't pay that much attention.

I am super keyed-up, but do my best to act normal. I grab the bag of dried mealworms from the SUV and fill the dispensers inside each cage, just like usual. The rest of the team is merely waiting for the clock to run out. No one seems to suspect anything is amiss.

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I know people think it's "weird" to call a bird my friend, but there's no other word to describe what Kuro became to me. I've never had a lot of friends—mostly just online ones, not in-person. People tend to be put off by my mannerisms and stimming, and few have the patience to put up with the time lag inherent in my form of communication.

Kuro did, though. The other Crebain thought of me as a kind of parent figure, but their interest never went much beyond my obvious function as Provider of Food. For some reason, Kuro saw me as an individual person from the beginning, and he quickly became a person for me, too.

I started staying after work almost every day, taking the latest possible bus that would get me home before curfew, just so I could talk to Kuro more. There wasn't a goal at first, for either of us—it was just curiosity, and the exhilaration of discovery and communication.

It was so much fun, learning corvid language and culture. Like . . . okay, so corvids have the concept of greeting, either with a general greeting call for individuals they don't recognize, or with names for ones they do. But there is no corresponding acknowledgement of leave-taking—no words, no rituals, nothing to indicate the conversation is over. If you're a crow, when you're done talking, you just . . . fly off. Kuro clearly thought my tendency to say "goodbye" when I went home each night was bizarre, although eventually he learned the English word just to humor me.

By this point, Emily was conducting external short-range tests with the Crebain, so they all had some experience of "outside." Some of them had even started asking me to let them outside; it always made me feel terrible to tell them no, that I couldn't—wouldn't—open the cage.

I know something about what it feels like to be caged, you see. I mean, there



weren't literal bars in my case, but there might as well have been. My parents . . . it's not that they don't love me, but they're so afraid of my making mistakes, or of getting hurt, that they wouldn't let me go anywhere or do anything. My mother vacillates between demanding that I do everything to ridiculously high neurotypical standards and not letting me do anything at all. At home, she cuts all my food into small bites, and pours my drink in a sippy cup, and insists I either use silverware properly or else she feeds me one bite at a time like a toddler. Sometimes I just want to scream: I'm twenty-three years old! So what if I make a mess—I can clean it up.

If it weren't for Dr. Amy, my therapist, I'd probably still be living at home today. She got me the place at Brown House—which isn't actually brown, by the way; it's named after a disability rights activist. Before that, she was the one who convinced my parents—slowly, over more than two years, while I fretted and chafed—that living away from home would be “good for my development.”

And it has been. I would never, ever have been allowed to take this job if I'd still been living with my parents. I have so much more freedom to choose what I do and how I do it, which means I've learned so many new things. The staff at Brown House is really cool about helping me find ways of accomplishing things that work for my particular brain and body, rather than forcing me to do stuff the same way everyone else does.

Someday it would be nice to be able to live more independently. But for now I need help, and that's okay.

I'm not sure that my parents understand, even now, how much I was already hurting—that being both physically confined and mentally constrained felt just as bad as nearly anything that might happen to me out in the world.

Anyway, the more Kuro and I talked, the more I hated being his jailer. So about six weeks ago, we hatched a plan for the Crebain's escape.

The trick was not merely to free them but to do so without revealing that they'd had any human help. I wasn't sure exactly what would happen if I was caught, but I did not want to find out.

I knew from listening to Emily and the others that the last few experiments—before the team stopped collecting data and wrote up their results—would be long-range field reliability tests: the Crebain would be taken away from the lab, released, and directed to a destination on another part of campus several kilometers away, where they would “spy” for twenty minutes before returning to the handlers. Then, back at the lab, each Crebain would be individually quizzed on which humans they had seen during that period. It was a setup, of course, with the correct answers known in advance; they'd been drilled to recognize the faces of other grad students, only some of whom were scheduled to show up at the test location.

Twenty unobserved minutes on the outside seemed like the best chance we would get. I looked up the schedule on the lab computer: the first long-range test was just under six weeks away. “Escape Day,” I told Kuro—in corvid, of course. I tried not to even *think* the words in English, lest my unreliable mouth betray me.

I guess the CIA or whoever designed the Crebain thought that tool manipulation skills might be useful in bird spies, because their beaks don't curve down at the end like American crows' do. They probably used genes from Hawaiian or New Caledonian crows, whose straighter beaks can more easily manipulate sticks and other tools. Also, the increased binocular overlap helps them track precisely where the end of the tool is going. All of this worked in our favor.

I got a box of metal paperclips from the supply closet, and for the next few weeks Kuro practiced straightening a paperclip out and using the end to unlatch each of his leg bands, until he could reliably do the whole thing in less than a minute. Twenty minutes should give him enough time to free himself and all of the others. If we were lucky.

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When Ji-Won sends the recall command, first one, then two more of the dots start back toward us. I chew my lip. Had something gone wrong? Had Kuro not had time to open all of the leg bands?

"If I were you I shouldn't wait until ni-Frith," I say urgently, balling my hands into fists to stop their anxious flapping. "I should go now. In fact, I think you'll have to."

The other six dots don't move, and soon the rest of the team realizes something is wrong. Everyone gets agitated and argues about what to do next. I check the numbers of the ones still heading our way: three, five, and eleven. Six other dots, including number eight, had not changed position.

A minute later, Sable lands on the top of one of the cages. Both of her leg bands are intact. Cole and Aswadu flap in right behind her. When they go for their mealworm rewards, Emily and Dr. Verdin shut the carrier doors behind them.

Emily notices my eyes tearing up, and tells me, "It's okay, we'll get the others back." I chew on my lip some more and say nothing.

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Of course the first thing I did, when I started thinking about helping the Crebain go free, was read everything I could find about captive crows being released to the wild. The news was not good—only a fraction of them survive even a single year. For example, conservationists have been trying to reintroduce the endangered native Hawaiian crow species to the wild for decades, and nearly all of them end up dying, every time.

I was really worried for the Crebain's chances. They're different from the native crows, so the wild flocks might not accept them—might even bully and attack them. (That's another phenomenon I'm intimately familiar with.) They don't know how to avoid or fight off predators like hawks and owls, and they haven't been taught how to find food in the wild.

But they're smarter than regular crows, so maybe they could learn more easily. And I could help them, the way Scott and Jean and the rest of the Brown House staff help me.

I couldn't do much about potential problems with other birds, although I did find a video about the predator training the Hawaiian crows received, and showed it to Kuro and some of the others—Onyx and Jet, two of the bolder birds, were especially interested. The three of them talked a lot about how to coordinate mobbing behavior.

Food, on the other hand, was something I could help with a lot. As soon as Kuro and I had made our plan, I told Jean and Scott that I wanted to start feeding crows in the backyard. They were agreeable, mostly I think because they were relieved that I'd stopped pestering them to let me keep a parrot in my room. So every morning for the past five weeks, I'd gotten up at seven and put out crow food—peanuts in the shell, dry dog kibble, sometimes pieces of boiled egg.

Of course other birds and animals came too—mostly jays (which are also corvids) and squirrels. But it only took four days for the local wild crows to catch on, and I'd had between eight and eleven every day since. Two different families, I think, at least one of which must have a nest somewhere nearby with hatchlings.

It was important that I establish this pattern well in advance—if I'd only started feeding crows right after the Crebain went missing, that might have seemed suspicious enough for someone to look into. But everyone at both work and home knows that corvids have replaced psittacines as my primary spin now, so this was all perfectly in character.

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The night after Escape Day I don't sleep until sometime after three-thirty, and then I wake up ten minutes before my alarm goes off. I worry about everything that

could go wrong—what if an owl attacks them, what if the lab figures out that I helped them, what if they get lost and can't find the right house. I'd shown them satellite photos, and Kuro seemed confident, but none of them have been more than a couple of kilometers from the lab in their lives. And the three who didn't make it—how will I get them out now? Everyone will be on alert. The whole project might be scrapped and the remaining Crebain sent away. Or even killed.

Being outside, with chirping birds and green smells, always calms me down. I scatter kibble on the feeding tables, then grab my tablet and sit down in my usual spot, in the patchy grass under a cedar tree a few meters away. Within seconds, I hear my name-call. I look up and see Kuro and Onyx winging toward me from one of the tall conifers nearby.

Onyx flies directly to one of the tables, while Kuro lands in the grass. There is a brief aggressive exchange between Onyx and two of the native crows who preceded him, but my foresight in buying two feeding tables seems to pay off, as the Crebain end up taking over one and the native crows the other. I scan anxiously for the other four and don't relax until Sid, Nyeusi, Jet, and 'Ele are all accounted for.

No one died overnight. I'm shaking with relief.

But I want to know what happened with the other three. I motion for Kuro's attention and tilt my head in the way that indicates a question, as though I'm looking first from one eye, then the other. "Sable Charcoal Aswadu," my tablet caws.

Kuro takes a few steps toward me. "Sable {negation} want come," he answers. "Charcoal Aswadu follow Sable."

Dammit! I push more buttons and tilt my head again. "{interrogation} Reason," I ask.

"Danger," says Kuro—causing brief consternation among the corvids at the feeders behind him, both Crebain and wild. He flips his wings in bird amusement and tries again. "Sable says: outside {negation} safety, {negation} food." He's silent for a few seconds, then says a word that I'm not sure I entirely understand—abstract concepts are tricky to pin down. I think it means something like "sadness" or "sorrow," but with overtones of "acceptance."

I think about that for a while as Kuro walks over to the table and fishes out a piece of kibble, then flies to the birdbath and dunks it in the water. "Acceptance" doesn't really describe how *I* feel: I'm frustrated and baffled and . . . yeah, a little bit angry, that after I risked so much to give them this opportunity, some of the Crebain decided they preferred captivity and torture. That doesn't make sense to me at all.

But forcing Sable and the others to leave the lab wouldn't have been right, either, so I don't know what else I could have done. I guess the important thing is that they each got to make their own choices, even if they're choices I don't agree with. That's what I wanted from *my* parents, after all.

Well. I play the "sorrow-acceptance" word back to Kuro, then add, "All Crebain {possession} choice good."

"Good," he agrees. Then, in surprisingly passable English, he says, "Thank you."

I didn't know he could say that! I do a little happy-flap with my hands, and tap the button for "You're welcome."

I stay there under the tree, watching, until the kibble is gone and both crows and Crebain begin to disperse. I am rocking, because I have too many feelings for my body—I am happy to see Kuro and his siblings free, but also my heart aches when he leaves; I am worried for his safety, but excited to see him again tomorrow.

There is no corvid word for "goodbye," but I feel a very human need to say something, to mark the end of this unusual beginning. For once, my mouth cooperates. "Be cunning and full of tricks," I whisper after them, as the last flash of iridescent black

disappears into the shadowy trees. "And your people shall never be destroyed."

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"Anyone who has been able to break from the grip of a controlling, crippling belief or bigotry or enforced ignorance knows the sense of coming out into the light and air, of release, being set free to fly, to transcend."

Ursula K. Le Guin